

The Sound of Somaesthetics: Ken Ueno's *Jericho Mouth*

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Abstract: *A sound installation titled Jericho Mouth was mounted at the Beijing Inside-Out Museum in 2013 by the American avant-garde composer and performer Ken Ueno. Drawing on the work of Richard Shusterman and Roland Barthes, this essay presents it as powerful example of acoustic somaesthetics in which the material body—in particular the voice emanating from the throat and guts rather than the lungs and breath—resists cultural sublimation.*

Keywords: *Ueno, Barthes, Shusterman, throat singing, pheno-song, geno-song, Jericho Mouth*

Aesthetics, it is often noted, emerged in the 18th century as a complement to an overly spiritual or rational philosophy, a way to take seriously the claims of the senses in our knowing the world. In the words of its founding father, Alexander Baumgarten, it was “the science of sensitive cognition.”¹ In time, it evolved to mean more specifically the theory of art and lost its connection to science, but the combination of sensuality and something else – call it knowledge or truth or spirituality – remained. Aisthesis, it was understood, involves both sensation and perception, the former relating to pleasure and emotion, the latter to objects and their cognition.² Insofar as sensation is mediated by the body and rooted in our existence in the material and animal world, it was understood to connect art to the “lower” or “baser” part of our nature. The countervailing perceptual impulse worked to elevate art above our instinctual needs and desires, linking it instead to something more sublime or spiritual, indeed often ethical as well. Matter, an aesthetics stressing perception taught, must be shaped by form in order to become art, form that imbued it with order, harmony, balance and wholeness. Corporeal interests had to be suppressed in the service of a more disinterested, contemplative appreciation of art for its own sake; the lust-inducing naked body had to be re-imagined as the chaste nude admired for its qualities of beautiful form. Shaping a world of artifice took its cue from the beauty humans had discovered in nature as well, and which they often attributed to divine design.

In the terms made familiar by Sigmund Freud, art, although connected to the senses, was thus the product of “sublimation,” which channeled our insatiable bodily desires and undisciplined instincts into socially acceptable practices and the creation of objects of value, understood often in economic as well as cultural terms. Artistic production and consumption were part of the

1 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt a.d. Oder, 1750); reprint Hildesheim, 1970) § 1

2 For a discussion, see Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics*, trans. Andrew Inkpin (London, 1997), p. 10

“civilizing process” that allowed us to tame the wilder sexual and aggressive drives that threatened communal life without resorting to the brutal repression of those drives that denied them any expression at all. By transfiguring the commonplace and infusing the everyday with beauty, art could reconcile us to a world that still remained in too many respects ugly, as well as spiritually under-nourished, especially after the waning of religious consolations in an increasingly secular age. Even when it expressed yearning for something better – that *promesse de bonheur* identified by the novelist Stendhal and extolled by the philosopher Nietzsche – it envisaged it as a life lived as if it were aesthetically beautiful.

Or so we have often been told. But not all observers have been convinced by what skeptics came to call “the aesthetic ideology.”³ Their qualms come in many forms, but one was the reluctance to move away too hastily from the imperfect and vulnerable body with all of its undisciplined and messy demands to a serenely sublimated world of beautiful forms, acceptable cultural behavior and enduring value. Take for example, the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, who writes in his collection of aphorisms *Minima Moralia*:

*Artists do not sublimate. That they neither satisfy nor repress their desires, but transform them into socially desirable achievements, their works, is a psychoanalytical illusion....Rather, artists display violent instincts, free-floating and yet colliding with reality, marked by neurosis....Their lot is rather a hysterically excessive lack of inhibition over every conceivable fear; narcissism taken to its paranoiac limit. To anything sublimated, they oppose idiosyncrasies.*⁴

As in much of Adorno's work, this is a palpable exaggeration, designed to shock the reader into questioning received wisdom about the elevating function of art and the consoling implications of culture at its most reassuringly anodyne. For art to be art, it must, after all, somehow distinguish itself from the raw experience out of which it is fashioned. But Adorno's assertion accurately expresses the resistance to sublimation – the de-aestheticization of art – that characterizes much of what nonetheless could still call itself art in the last century.

Take the case of twentieth-century avant-garde music. In Schoenberg's great unfinished opera *Moses und Aron*, to cite a salient example, there is a powerful opposition between the lyrical tenor arias of Aron, the advocate of meaningful communication, who uses sensual pleasure to lead the masses to God, and the unmelodious *Sprechstimme* of Moses, whose unsuccessful struggle to convey the divine word to the Hebrew people produces an anguish that resists being sublimated. In *Moses*, we hear the agony of a voice that comes from the depths of his being, but which cannot be transfigured into conventional expressions of beauty. In the Bible, Moses tells God that he is “heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue” (Exod. 4:10), which has often been understood to describe a stutter, but which Schoenberg renders in musical terms as an inability to sing in the conventional uplifting, mellifluous way that characterized sacred music for centuries. It was not by chance that when invited to write for the movies by an eager American film producer who gushed, “Last Sunday when I heard the lovely music you have written...,” Schoenberg interrupted to snap: “I don't write ‘lovely’ music.”

In order to make sense of the de-aestheticization of art and return to the unsublimated body in much recent art, it may help to invoke the discourse of so-called “somaesthetics” recently

3 See, for example, Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis, 1996)

4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London, 1974), p. 213

developed by the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman.⁵ Drawing in part on his schooling in American Pragmatist philosophy, in particular the work of John Dewey, and in part on his experience as a Feldenkreis physical therapist, he seeks to overcome the gap between mind and body, high and low art, even art and the world outside its alleged border. Soma, the Latin word for “body,” is used to stress the interpenetration of mind and flesh, rather than the passivity of a body that is merely there to be formed by spirit. Rather than contemplating objects from afar, assuming a position of elevated disinterestedness, somaesthetics involves an experiential unification of subject and object in a moment of bodily intensity, as often painful as pleasurable, in the place of an eternity of formal, cold beauty. Rather than upholding the autonomy of art for its own sake, it abets the invigoration of life by art, a project foreshadowed in many avant-garde practices in movements like Dada and Surrealism. Rather than identifying art with organic wholeness and sublimated balance, it expands it to include the fragment, interrupted and incomplete.

There is much more to be said about somaesthetics and its connections, for example with democratic politics and practices of physical well-being,⁶ but it is time to ask if it helps us to situate Ken Ueno’s work in general and *Jericho Mouth* in particular. In his remarkable career as composer and performer, Ueno has drawn on a variety of experiences and influences, ranging from his experiments as a child in making odd noises into a tape recorder and contemporary “heavy metal” popular music to the traditions of Tuvan throat singing (*Khoomei*) from Mongolia, which involve the simultaneous sounding of several pitches producing a rich texture of overtones. Ueno’s body serves as his primary instrument, even if at times it is technologically amplified by a microphone. The result is a powerfully immersive experience for singer and audience alike, in which the sounds resonate within us as well as in our environment, revealing the boundary between self and world as porous and ephemeral. The overtones are, however, anything but dulcet and no melodies emerge to help orient us in an audioscape that defies reduction to conventional musical language.

In *Jericho Mouth*, Ueno created in 2013 a sound installation in Beijing’s Inside-Out Museum, in which a large hollow space with three apertures, called the “miniature museum,” serves to amplify his performance, either live or flowing from computer-selected samples of his recorded singing.⁷ The walls of the museum serve as prosthetic extensions of his body, shaking with powerful waves of sound that emanate from somewhere within. Whether they will crumble like those felled by the blasts of rams horns trumpeted by Joshua’s army in the Hebrew Bible is uncertain; this is, after all, still an exercise within the frame of that most quintessential institution of art, a museum. But the effect is still exhilaratingly potent, in which the limits of the aesthetic are tested and the desublimated body insists on literally getting a hearing.

To clarify in conclusion the somaesthetic implications of this work, let me turn to Roland Barthes’ celebrated essay of 1972 on “the grain of the voice, which introduced a useful distinction between what he calls “pheno-song” and “geno-song.”⁸ The former he describes as “all of the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded

5 Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York, 1997); and *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2001); and *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York, 2008).

6 See, for example, Dorota Koczanowicz and Wojciech Malecki, eds. *Shusterman’s Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics* (Amsterdam, 2012) and Martin Jay, “Somaesthetics and Democracy: John Dewey and Contemporary Body Art,” in *Refractions of Violence* (New York, 2003)

7 It can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuKTO5LhbQE>.

8 Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977).

form of the melisma, the composer's idiolect, the style of interpretation: in short, everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about, which forms the tissue of cultural values." The latter, the "geno-song," is "the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate" to form "a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings) expression."⁹ Whereas "pheno-song" is in the service, we might say, of cultural sublimation, "geno-song" gets us in touch – a metaphor that is particularly apt – with the unsublimated body "from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages...the voice is not personal, it expresses nothing of the cantor, of his soul...it has us hear a body which has no civil identify, no 'personality.'" Whereas in psychoanalytic terms, the "pheno-song" speaks the language of the Father, "the geno-song," the 'grain of the voice,' is the "materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue."¹⁰ As such, it re-connects us with erotic desires we – and here Barthes is talking of his experience as a man much besotted by his mother – otherwise channel into culturally acceptable ways to obey the Father's law.

Barthes helps us even further by identifying the corporeal location of the pheno-song, which he identifies with the lungs and what he criticizes as "the myth of respiration." It is connected with the *pneuma*, the soul or spirit that allegedly elevates us above the baseness of the lived body. It is what conventional training in singing strives to foster with the discipline of breathing. In contrast, the geno-song is located elsewhere in the body: "it is in the throat, a place where the phonic metal hardens and is segmented, in the mask that *signifiance* [Barthes's term for sensual, material, non-communicative meaning] explodes, bringing not the soul but *jouissance* [bliss, often sexual in connotation]." Can there be any more explosively potent grain of the voice than one that just might – who knows – knock the walls of Jericho to the ground?

9 Ibid., p. 182

10 Ibid.



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Art & Technology, Aalborg University
Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Denmark

ISSN: 2246-8498